

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

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Pentecost & Baptisms

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. *Amen.*

Without much to redirect the blacktop when they paved Texas State Highway 90 – scarcely a cook shack or a big oak tree, much less a lake or full-service suburb – the road now runs a nearly straight line out of San Antonio. Heading west, the commercial sprawl of our nation’s seventh-largest city dissolves abruptly past the outer loop 1604. The few retailers dotting the shoulder on this edge of town – a car dealership, an RV center, a storage facility flying a massive American flagⁱ – soon yield entirely to ranch land.

A Massachusetts friend once described this area to me as “Texas beautiful,” which she did not intend as faint praise. Instead of the full, flashing colors of a New England fall or the teeming evergreens of my native Louisiana, the Texas savanna is the peculiar beauty of wide, open spaces: the wind blowing hay fields into a boil ... the lone farmhouse, a tiny tophat on a distant rise ... interesting fences, old and new, made of block-stone or cedar posts or barbed wire ... waves of dust rising behind cultivators ... all against a deep-blue dome stretching into forever.

I learned of the Robb Elementary School shooting while attending a board meeting at the Seminary of the Southwest in Austin, a three-hour drive from the massacre. With several members of the Board from the Diocese of West Texasⁱⁱ and others of us having spent time in Uvalde for one reason or another, the terror felt especially near. Our business agenda ended with a ragged edge as we all checked our phones, exchanged information, and prayed.

Long-established plans called for me to remain in central Texas through the weekend, and on Friday I began to consider driving to Saint Philip’s Episcopal Church in Uvalde for Sunday worship. Not immune to either the “do-something” impulse or the “need-to-be-needed,” I interrogated my motives as best I could, testing the idea with peers and our Trinity Wardens. I did not want to go to have my needs met. I did not want to spectate an intimate grief not my own. I did not want to be a distraction. Yet I could not shake the pull.

Though sharing the emotional overwhelm of so many in this country and around the world, I found great reassurance in the knowledge that there is an Episcopal congregation in Uvalde, and I *did* want to join my prayers with theirs. I wanted to sit on a back row in slacks and a polo and receive Communion with them. I wanted, as I could, to bring Trinity Church to their altar ... to bear the love of us on Copley Square, an offering of presence in their hurt, a witness both to the horror they had endured and to the eternal dream we share ... and even if no one knew any of that, to dare the humble hope that there could be balm in the visit, for them most importantly, and, perhaps, even for us. So last Sunday morning I woke early and headed west.

The speed limit snaps from 75 to 35 when passing through the few towns along this way, one marquee famously greeting visitors, “Welcome to Hondo, Texas: This Is God’s Country Please Don’t Drive Through It Like Hell.”ⁱⁱⁱ Along another community’s roadside, the Chamber of Commerce has posted three-foot tall, rectangular portraits of the local high-school graduates vested in their caps-and-gowns. With impressive consistency – like a long, neat row of boardgame tokens – each sign sits at the same angle to the highway, the same distance from those before and behind it, and each image is identical in its appearance, every graduate’s full name proudly printed in a colorful banner above their brightly smiling face.

Before long, Highway 90 becomes Main Street inside the Uvalde city limits, split into East Main and West Main by Highway 83. In turn, Highway 83 becomes Getty Street in town, split by Main into North Getty and South Getty. On the four corners of this intersection – where a map would pinpoint, *Uvalde* – sit the County Courthouse, the Municipal Court, The Post Office, and the town square, a green-space. Coming in from San Antonio, Saint Philips is a quarter-mile to the right, up North Getty; Robb Elementary is to the left, less than a mile down South Getty and a couple blocks on to Old Carrizo Road.

Just five days after the shooting, businesses have already taped posterboards to their marquees, most hand-painted with encouragements like, “UvaldeStrong,” and “Pray For Uvalde.” Several yards display collections of 21: flags, crosses, plastic candles. A cohort of old men wearing cowboy hats and blue jeans drink coffee from Styrofoam cups outside the Whataburger.

With record heat predicted, I stop at the H.E.B. (the Texas standard for grocery stores) to pick up fresh ice for the lunch I’d packed, and a barrel-chested security guard with a pistol holstered at his side greets me at the door. When I pull back onto Main Street, a phalanx of motorcycle officers flash blue-and-white lights and clear the path for two Suburbans with tinted windows. Chevrolets and Fords, sedans and SUVs with shields on their doors from federal offices and neighboring towns’ and counties’ police and sheriff’s departments, idle on every side street. Perhaps in anticipation of President Biden and the First Lady’s visit later in the day, the scale of the law-enforcement presence gives an impression that the town has drawn its shades.

News vans with mounted antennas and satellites crowd the square. Sidewalks from the four corners of the park create an “X” with a fountain at center, and 21 crosses, each with a blue heart and a carefully scripted name, perimeter its pool. I think immediately of those Medina County graduates’ photographs I had only just seen during my drive – young people joyfully beginning their adulthood – and now these flowers and mementos marking lives so viciously ended before equally glad days would have – *should have* – come for them and for their families. As I had felt a swell of pride in being a part of a human community that raised those high schoolers to their commencement, at this fountain I feel the swell of complicity in the violence that, alongside all the beauties of our life together in this country, we do “unto” ourselves, unto our neighbors, and even unto our children.

I find a parking place across the street from the large and welcoming campus of Saint Philip’s Church and School. From their website: “Each day at noon for 22 days we will pause to remember and reflect on the lives lost and pray for the City of Uvalde. The bell will toll 22

times for the lives lost in our community ...” As I look back toward the center of town, I am certain that those gathered at the fountain will hear that toll, and I suspect that if the wind was blowing right, so, too, could those keeping vigil at Robb Elementary. I also realize that Saint Philip’s count of the dead includes the young aggressor – who, himself, was only eighteen when he committed this atrocity and then died by return gunfire.

The early service gathers in a chapel adjacent the main sanctuary and nave. I pick up a leaflet and sit in the far corner of the rearmost pew. By my count there are seventeen of us present, not including the altar party. Like most 8:00 Episcopal congregations, these folks seem to know one another – nodding or lifting a hand in each other’s direction as they enter – and I strongly suspect they sit in the same place every week. Hoping I’ve not occupied anyone’s spot, I thumb through the program, reading that the altar flowers have been given by parishioners “in memory of the lives lost and in remembrance of those injured or grieving, for the community of Uvalde and all who live here.” The back page of the leaflet lists upcoming birthdays and wedding anniversaries, and I notice that the couple who gave the flowers is celebrating their wedding anniversary this very Sunday.

The chapel air feels weighted with expectation, like some number of us – from our different perspectives and rings of connection to the shootings – have been waiting for our Sunday churchgoing to make sense of what has happened, to acknowledge it. The rector and lay server^{iv} enter from a side door, and the congregation stands. The rector bows toward the altar and steps to the center of its rail. He extends his arms, and, without affect, announces into the heavy air, “Alleluia. Christ is risen.”

The pronouncement catches me by surprise, though it certainly should not have; I know how an Easter-season liturgy begins, the same way we began this morning’s worship. Before I know what I am doing, I join the response on cue: “The Lord is risen, indeed. Alleluia.” The words feel uncommonly defiant, and I have trouble drawing a deep breath.

The Rector continues the Rite I Eucharist. I’ve not prayed those words in a long time now, but every syllable – “And with thy spirit”^v – feels as familiar and reassuring as my grandmother’s kitchen. In the way our lectionary intersects our world’s condition, some lines from the lessons – the same as those read last week at Trinity – land with force: from Psalm 97, “Clouds and thick darkness are all around [the Lord; yet] righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne”^{vi} ... and from the Gospel of John, “I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you love me.”^{vii}

After the Gospel – “Praise be to thee, O Christ”^{viii} – the Rector returns to the center of the aisle. Holding a printed text in his right hand, he invites the congregation to be seated, and he begins his message without glancing at his notes: “We will never get over what has happened. Children have been killed. Our hearts have been broken. The image of our hometown has been shattered ... [yet] my hope and my belief and even my experience are that we will get through this.”^{ix}

He speaks soberly, with the sincerity of one who has served seventeen years in this community. Of that question he has been asked so many times – “What can we do?” – he names, “at a deeper

level, [that question] expresses our feelings of helplessness and powerlessness ... Those feelings are real[, yet the question] also expresses our hope ... [suggests] there is a way forward, that we are more than what has happened to us.” His last claim plays on a loop inside my head: *we are more than what has happened to us*. With a calming presence, he continues with care and challenge, urging the congregation to consider what “more” all of us can do to advance the Gospel’s causes of love and hope.

After the sermon, we profess our faith and voice “Prayers of the People” that include the names of all who died in that elementary school. We confess our sins and share the Peace. We break the bread and pass the cup. We give thanks, receive a blessing, and affirm our call to go out into the world.

After church, I linger at the end of the receiving line and visit with the rector, the Rev. Dr. Michael K. Marsh. He shares with me that he completed his CPE – “Clinical Pastoral Education,” a chaplaincy experience required by most seminary programs – at Beth-Israel. He explains that his sister lived south of Boston at the time and provided him a convenient place to stay. When he notes that he visited Trinity more than once that summer, the world feels just as small as it is.

He then walks me into Saint Philip’s beautiful sanctuary. I kneel at its altar and offer a prayer. He and I pray together, and I shake his hand, aiming to get out of his way before what will certainly be a demanding morning for him and the congregation he serves.

I get in my car and start back east. I think of the Gospel’s *more* he called us to consider. As I drive, I pray for his family by name, and I pray for the Uvalde community.^x

This morning at Trinity Church in the City of Boston – a long way from Robb Elementary and North Getty Street, and, yet, not so far at all – we join the Church throughout the world and celebrate the feast of Pentecost. To mark the occasion, we baptize, welcoming six children into the “company of all the saints” that stretches across time and space, from those earliest apostles who encountered “divided tongues, as of fire,”^{xi} to those faithful also gathering at this very hour – *right now* – at Saint Philip’s Episcopal in Uvalde ... at Saint Philip’s Episcopal in Buffalo ... at Saint John’s Episcopal in Tulsa ... “we in them, and they in us,”^{xii} as Jesus promised in last Sunday’s lesson.

This morning we also offer public thanksgiving for all who were baptized since the pandemic began, including those baptized at small services we held apart from our Sunday worship during one or another of the virus’ peaks. Celebrating with all these families, we renew the promises at the heart of our faith, receiving comfort in the reminder that wherever people are *hurting*, our Church – **The Episcopal Church** – is there, *healing*. We always baptize into the broadest Body of Christ, of course, yet by our presence at *this* font, we also become an essential element of *every* Episcopal congregation, *everywhere*. And that is a great blessing. While we do not presume to share the deeply personal griefs of our aching kindred, we can find strength in the hope we share in Christ Jesus ... we can find consolation in the advocate we share in the Holy

Spirit ... and by the “wonderful and sacred mystery”^{xiii} of our Communion, we can take heart that what we do *here*, makes a difference *there*, in spirit and in substance.

Indeed, “the hope of the world is the parish church,”^{xiv} that family of choice where we love one another in moments joyful and grievous, for the sake of ourselves and for the good of the whole cosmos. Thanks be to God and our great joy, Trinity Church will always be the home parish for Charlotte, Oliver, and Margo, for Emmett, Theodore, and Connor. And to their parents and godparents, trust that we will seek to love your children with our whole hearts – all of us, as God loves them. And by the gift of our wider fellowship, know, too, that they will always have a community to love them, for wherever their lives will carry them, they will find an Episcopal Church eager to receive them and offer the same joyful welcome.

For, truly, “There is one Body and one Spirit ... one hope in God’s call to us ... One Lord, one Faith, one Baptism, one God and Creator of all.”^{xv} And the promises we profess are now theirs and ours ... on this feast of Pentecost and forever.

For the life of the world to come,
Amen.

ⁱ ... the sorts of places that need acres to house their inventory.

ⁱⁱ Saint Philip’s is a parish of the Diocese of West Texas.

ⁱⁱⁱ I did not see the sign on this trip, and I wonder if it’s been removed. I remember a lawsuit arguing that not everyone in the area believed in God, therefore the message impinged on atheists’ rights.

^{iv} A “subdeacon,” the vested, lay leader who serves as lector, intercessor, chalice, acolyte, and Altar Guild.

^v The Rite I alternative to “And also with you.”

^{vi} Psalms 97:2.

^{vii} John 17:23.

^{viii} More of the distinctive, Rite I language.

^{ix} Marsh, The Rev. Dr. Michael K. “A Better Question For Uvalde.” May 29, 2022. I draw these quotes from the Facebook recording of the later service, though I recall the words as the same he preached at the earlier liturgy. With gratitude to Mike, he read this sermon on Friday and confirmed both the accuracy of these details, as well as, more broadly, his comfort level with my preaching of my experience in this way.

^x More thoughts and prayers. I understand the frustrations expressed by the “thoughts and prayers” offered in response to horrors like the shootings in Buffalo, Uvalde, and now Tulsa. Even so, we in The Episcopal Church are a thinking and praying people – not solely, but importantly, essentially. By thinking and praying we keep the needs of the hurting before the needs of ourselves. By thinking and praying we realize our strength as parish communities. By thinking and praying we discern God’s hope for our collective action. By thinking and praying we sustain our movement toward greater Love, greater Peace, greater Joy.

^{xi} Acts 2:3.

^{xii} John 17:22-23. “The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

^{xiii} From our *Book of Common Prayer*'s Holy Week and ordination rites: "O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favorably on your whole Church, **that wonderful and sacred mystery**; by the effectual working of your providence, carry out in tranquillity the plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*"

^{xiv} A notion proposed by so many seminary professor and senior clerics that it is likely unattributable at this point, but I sure do believe it.

^{xv} From the opening dialogue of "Holy Baptism" in *The Book of Common Prayer*, 1979.